Examinations & Vaccinations for Kits

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Ferret kits require regular veterinary care at an early age, just like puppies and kittens. Prevention measures such as vaccinations, and treatments such as deworming can get your young ferret off to a healthy start. Veterinary exams may reveal other problems such as ear mites, fleas, or congenital problems.

Examination and vaccination schedule

6 to 9 weeks old

- First veterinary visit to assess general health
- Stool sample to check for intestinal parasites
- First canine distemper vaccination if the vaccination history of the mother is unknown

9 or 10 weeks old

- Distemper vaccination

12 or 13 weeks old

- Distemper vaccination
- Rabies vaccination

14 to 16 weeks old

- Distemper vaccination

Vaccinations

All healthy ferrets should be revaccinated for canine distemper and rabies once a year, even if they do not go outside.

Canine distemper is almost invariably fatal in ferrets. People who contact dogs or walk in a place where an infected dog has urinated can carry the distemper virus to the ferret.

Exposure to rabies is rare, but because it is a fatal disease in man, it is your legal responsibility to take every possible precaution to protect your pet and people who contact him.

Vaccines used in ferrets

Distemper vaccines:
Editor's Note: Since this article was written, the common distemper vaccine used in ferrets (Fervac-D® United Vaccines) is no longer available. The only currently FDA approved canine distemper vaccine for ferrets is Purevax-D by Merial. Galaxy-D made by Schering-Plough has been used for years to vaccinate ferrets, but is not FDA approved since the company has not completed the necessary FDA/USDA testing to obtain the indication for use in ferrets.

Regardless of the vaccine used, the risk of an anaphylactic (sudden allergic) reaction to canine distemper vaccine appears to be higher in ferrets than in dogs. For that reason, the following guidelines should be followed:

- Be aware of the signs of an anaphylactic reaction in ferrets: sudden onset of vomiting, diarrhea, weakness (ferret becomes limp), pale or bluish gums.
- Remain at your veterinarian's office at least 30-60 minutes after the vaccination so your ferret can be monitored for any reaction. These reactions can be life-threatening, and need to be treated immediately.
- Since there could be a delayed reaction, monitor your ferret closely for 24 hours after the vaccination. Schedule the vaccination so that you or someone else will be able to monitor your ferret during this time.
- Be sure veterinary care will be available to you for 24 hours after the vaccination. Know the emergency phone number for your veterinarian and/or emergency clinic in the event your ferret would have a reaction and need immediate attention.

> Vaccinations may cause severe reactions in ferrets. Discuss the risk with your veterinarian, and remain at your veterinarian's office at least 30-60 minutes after the vaccination.

Rabies vaccines: There is one killed rabies vaccine labelled for ferrets, Imrab3® (Merial). Imrab1® (Merial) is safe but is not approved for ferrets and should NOT be used. No recombinant rabies vaccines are approved for use in ferrets, and insufficient testing has been done to determine whether they will induce protective immunity in ferrets. As rabies is a fatal disease in man,

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only the approved vaccine should be used in ferrets. A ferret vaccinated with an unapproved vaccine will certainly be killed for a rabies test if he bites a human being.

Reactions to vaccinations

Some ferrets are allergic to components of distemper or rabies vaccines. Allergic ferrets may show a reaction known as anaphylaxis. Within minutes of being vaccinated, the ferret begins vomiting, and may also have diarrhea. Some go limp and may lose consciousness. Ferrets that have this reaction once will not necessarily have another when given a different vaccine, but it is likely that they will react to the same type of vaccine again. It is wise to remain at the veterinary office for 30-60 minutes after an injection is given to a ferret that once reacted to a vaccine. There is a treatment that works rapidly to reverse the reaction, if given soon after the first signs are noticed. The longer the reaction has been going on, the more difficult it is to reverse it.

An allergic ferret may be treated with oral antihistamine an hour or more before he is vaccinated, to prevent an adverse reaction occurring. Your veterinarian can dispense the correct product and dose when a vaccination is scheduled.

The possibility of a vaccine reaction is not worth the risk of leaving the ferret unvaccinated. There is no effective treatment for distemper. Ferrets rarely die of an allergic reaction, but susceptible ferrets exposed to distemper will die a painful death.

Heartworm prevention

Ferrets that live outside or are taken outside during summer months should be put on heartworm prevention when the mosquito season starts, or year-round. The medication must be prescribed by a veterinarian.

Dental care

It is important that a ferret's teeth come in correctly, or difficulty in eating or mouth injuries may occur. Your veterinarian can check your young ferret's teeth at each visit and identify any problems early so they can be more easily corrected.

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